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ABSTRACT

Researchers seem to discuss only rarely the actual activities and strategies involved in the research process. Part of the problem is in the current conception of research method, which continues to insist that empirical methods are neutral procedures for obtaining results. At every step of the research process, researchers discursively construct and alter their methods, but little of this information is translated into resulting written texts. A project which involved the interviews of composition researchers addresses this gap, asking how they conduct and construct research. One result of these interviews is a deeper understanding of the range of ways in which social factors might affect a researcher's text. In addition, the interviews revealed that those researchers wanting to effect local, situated ends for their research use language that emphasizes measurability and validity while those wanting to influence the direction of the field may not choose the agreed-upon language of a field's practitioners. Composition studies need to adopt a more explicitly rhetorical and situated perspective on research methods, which draws attention to the audiences, purposes, and genres for which research is conducted. (Contains 64 references and 5 notes.) (PM)

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Conducting (and Constructing) Research on Writing: Rhetorics from the Field.

by Chris Fosen

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Conducting (and Constructing) Research on Writing: Rhetorics from the Field
Chris Fosen
CCCC 2002

As researchers in composition studies, we are only beginning to study formally *our own* processes of composing—the factors involved in choosing research methods, conducting research, and representing our work in print. With the exception of the critical-reflective texts that appear from time to time, researchers—perhaps because of lack of an appropriate genres and venues—seem to discuss only rarely the actual activities and strategies involved in the research process.

Part of the problem, I would suggest, is in our current conception of research "method." Many introductory research texts in composition (and in education generally) continue to insist that empirical methods are neutral procedures for obtaining results, giving the impression that they are invisible or separable from the social contexts in which they are used. In this paper, I will discuss some conceptions of "method" in composition, and offer some in-process results from a project I'm now working on in which I interview researchers and examine how they constructed their work.

I want to begin by briefly discussing a methods text for research courses, Mason and Bramble's (1997) *Research in Education and the Behavioral Sciences*, which in its systematic presentation of the procedures and technologies of empirical research seems very much typical of the genre.[1] The text breaks down research styles into categories,

[1] In a chapter on ethnography, for example, readers are encouraged first and foremost to select a topic of study, keeping in mind factors such as the "availability of a site in which to conduct the study, an interest and familiarity with the topic, and potential importance of the study to broader social, scholarly, or policy-related issues" (p. 337). The authors do briefly suggest that researchers consider the practicality of a topic, and before beginning to conduct their study attempt to gauge problems of access and possible financial barriers.

separates out research design from the conduct of research, presents a variety of methodological tools and techniques, and encourages us to apply these methods uniformly across all research topics and all sites for conducting research. In doing so, it greatly reduces the complex considerations and shifting perspectives that make up research to formal procedures and technical essentials. The authors offer no extended examples of researchers developing actual investigative plans, and information about the effects that research sites, institutional demands, and background information might play is cursory at best. Simply put, research is represented as a linear process that employs neutral tools in the search for scientific truths.

In composition studies, texts such as Lauer and Asher's (1988) *Composition Research: Empirical Designs* and MacNealy's (1999) *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing* seem similarly procedural in their orientation on methodology. These seminal methods texts do argue for multidisciplinary or multi-modal research practices and against privileging one method over another, but the authors' recommendations clearly favor using research to craft and test generalizations about the writing process, and so to establish formal models that can be refined through progressive science. The act of choosing research methods seems to evolve naturally from the type of question that researchers ask, or out of a researcher's preexisting (but usually unacknowledged) relationship to particular theories, epistemologies, or paradigms. Research methods proceed smoothly from specific questions to supportable answers, and writing plays an arguably reduced role as an afterthought to the real work of gathering and interpreting data.[2]

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[2] The field seems to resort most frequently to the language of paradigms and paradigm shifts to explain the languages of research. Most argue that embedded in these different languages are irreconcilable views of

In these texts, methodology seems less a way of knowing, a way of orienting to the world, than a rather loose collection of procedural guidelines. Under this conception of method, as Sullivan and Porter (1997) argue, "data collection tools often are invisible, except from the perspective of establishing a proper or reliable procedure for their use" (p. 48). And just as methods are seen as neutral tools for gathering data, writing is likewise seen as the relatively unproblematic transcription of thought—if not completely transparent, then certainly an all-purpose skill. One result of this situation, I would argue, is that practitioners are encouraged to consider the issues of *how we go about inquiring* and *what we inquire about* separately from each other, a circumstance that all too often results in privileging the "content" over the method, the "what" over the "how."

If methods are neutral tools, isolated from the context of their use, researchers may engage or alter them regardless of their beliefs or ideological positions, and any modifications in method thus become merely "procedural fixes" not open to critique (Sullivan and Porter, 1997, p. 47). So an instrumentalist orientation on research methodology such as this one reduces the various processes of research to fixed stages and a-contextual criteria while further separating research *theory* from actual research

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the issues worth investigating, the ways to define these issues, and what constitutes a valid way of knowing. And defined in this way, they seem to take precedence over any other aspect of the research process (a la Cooper responding to Barton's "More Methodological Matters" in *CCC*).

The ascendancy of paradigm talk in place of method talk also carries other more limiting material and theoretical consequences. Instead of giving sustained attention to their methodological choices, paradigms unfairly pigeonhole groups of researchers into particular belief systems they may not share. The categories of "positivist," "post-positivist," "constructivist," and "critical" research do not only seem vague. In a field known for cutting across methodological and theoretical boundaries, these categorical positions suggest that researchers are precluded from mixing methods or attempting to accommodate concepts and values of different perspectives. Indeed, under this conception it is unclear whether a compositionist's motives, abilities, and techniques would play any more than a minor role in her own research. Instead of using the term to examine actual research methods, writers seem to reify theories of paradigms and paradigm shifts as explanatory matrixes instead of examining the actual practices of conducting scholarly inquiry. This position, while it opens up new vistas for the exploration of theory and theory change, seems to grant epistemology control over even the smallest functions and procedures of research.

practice. In this neglect of inquiry processes and the conventions and strategies by which we construct texts, methods texts seem almost analogous to so-called current-traditional composition textbooks, which arguably (still) tend to present composing as a linear process that accurately mirrors a writer's thoughts.[3]

Nor would we be able to gather much sense of the actual practices of researchers through methods sections in published reports. In the interest of communication efficiency and available space in journals or books, much material relating to process is taken out. The formal research reports that result do not explicitly represent all of the activity that went into their making (Medawar, 1964), nor do they commonly provide sufficient detail for other researchers to replicate their findings (Collins, 1985). And though replicability was in Enlightenment Europe the key test of the trustworthiness of an experiment, replication in modern science is more rare (Gross, 1996).

We conduct research, then, but seem to be unwilling to talk about the activities and processes that constitute it. I'm reminded of Philip Arrington in 1991 wondering why, "after two decades of going beyond alchemy, have so few researchers been willing to describe with candor their own processes of research? . . . Composition researchers had roundly debunked the earlier, 'linear' theories of composing. Yet, when representing their own research processes, they see precisely and only that: a straight line" (p. 383).

The tensions I have outlined above point to the importance of understanding more than just the formal conventions and structures of research. At every step of the research

[3] For composition researchers, whose scholarly work has frequently refuted the prescriptive, individualistic orientation of composition textbooks, this situation is ironic—given that researchers themselves construct unified texts by means of numerous recursive stages of invention and arrangement of material. Researchers are also composers, but one might not know this from reading methods texts in composition studies and in education generally.

process, researchers discursively construct and alter their methods, but little of this information seems to be translated into resulting written texts. While we are regularly expanding our notions of how paradigm, theory, narrative, and epistemology impinge upon theory and practice in the field, the actual mechanisms of research remain largely unexamined. How do researchers pick (and execute) a course of inquiry? What issues, conditions, or other material factors influence their decision to use one particular method? What relationships might there be between their research goals and the language they use in the finished reports?

In an ongoing project in which I am interviewing a number of composition researchers, part of which became my dissertation, I've tried to get at some of these questions. I've wanted to know about what does not get written down, the processes by which researchers both come to know a state of affairs and to argue for it, how they conduct and construct research. For this work, I've adopted perspectives used most frequently in rhetoric of science[4] and genre theory.

One result of these interviews, so far, is a deeper understanding of the range of ways in which social factors might affect a researcher's text. In one interview, I learned

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[4] Rhetoric of science generally examines all forms of communication in the process of research, not just the resulting journal articles, manuscripts, and other "coins of the realm." One should resist giving the formally published text undue priority over oral or other informal forms of communication—the research article is not the only place where meaning resides. Bazerman (1988) argues a similar point when he states that "attempts to understand genre by the texts themselves are bound to fail, for they treat socially constructed categories as stable natural facts" (p. 7, fn. 8). For the purposes of examining research, we must look across individual forms of the text to see the activities, in this case the research methods, they encode. Using this perspective, Bazerman (1994) argues, "the material activities become part of the processes by which texts are framed, understood, and evaluated just as much as the texts become part of the processes by which the material practices are framed, understood, and evaluated" (p. 88). Rhetoric of inquiry, then, is a means of capturing communication as an activity of situated social agents, a way of studying action as well as contemplation (Zarefsky, 1990). The process of formal publication reifies certain methods, participants, and results of research into fixed objects that can thereby be normalized and transformed into facts (Bazerman, 1988, 1993; Gross, 1996). To examine only formally published documents as evidence of one or another type of research, as one might with genre theory, might lead to hasty conclusions about the conduct of research.

that a teacher-researcher who had crafted an in-depth quantitative study of gender and argument resisted the traditionally qualitative strand of teacher research in composition in order to meet wholly unstated goals: to see her work effect changes in pedagogy and assessment on a larger level than in her own classroom.

TRANSPARENCY ONE:

> It became clearer and clearer to me that there were two things I wanted to do. I wanted to work with a program that was going to promote teacher research—that it was something that I could do, that other teachers in the public schools could do, that would actually measure whether or not students were learning how to write. That was one of my goals that I wanted to work toward, because I really believe in teacher-action research. And it was something that I wanted to continue once I was done with the dissertation. And I also wanted to look at something that was measurable. At the University of [a Research One school] right now, all of the research is qualitative. And I knew that in order to be able to do the kind of research I wanted to, I needed to somehow meld the two . . . I needed to do a cooperative sort of thing where I could count numbers and I could do interviews and I could come up with this blending of research methods that would be palatable to me and to my committee.

The text took on the form it did after numerous hours working with a statistician and with members of her dissertation committee, who pulled equally hard on the writer to make her work more quantitative, more quantitative, or both at the same time. The passages in the resulting text are largely hierarchical, leading readers from general claims about the project's findings through the very specific numerical data supporting those claims, and she refers to herself throughout as "the researcher":

TRANSPARENCY TWO:

> Statistically significant results at the .05 level are presented for the evaluative and potency dimensions for the concept "agreeing." The observed differences between pretest and posttest scores for the activity concept "agreeing" were not statistically significant. On the evaluative dimension students came to see "agreeing" in a

less positive light. Mean evaluative ratings on the "agreeing" scale dropped from 15.3784 to 14.1081. Similarly, on the potency dimension they began to feel agreeing was weaker. Mean potency ratings dropped from 11.9459 to 10.6757.

Verbs more frequently used are *to be* and those similar to *suggest* and *argue*, which indicate very clearly a disciplinary conversation, and sentences are generally heavy with nominalizations. Susan Peck MacDonald's (1994) *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences* would call this language "epistemic," saying that all these linguistic factors work together in a text to create opportunities for an author to state where her work fits into a larger field, and so to consolidate or unify disciplinary knowledge. And though case studies do appear in the finished product, many of the conventions of qualitative work—narrative and reflexive passages, resistance to generalization, and so on—do not appear.

Her mode of inquiry and of the resulting text seem to have been influenced by a number of belief systems, mentors and audiences for her work, the work of her own classrooms, the severe time constraints she set herself for finishing the PhD, and so on.

TRANSPARENCY THREE:

I've found that the qualitative information—even in my final review of my dissertation, there was one person on my committee who was really hammering on the qualitative, and I just came away from it, feeling like, you know, it's important for us as professionals to look at both things. I really don't think it has to be one way or the other.

What did that reader say, about the qualitative information?

She said that I really needed to pull in more and here I am, you know, after I've essentially written everything, been approved, and then . . . This is someone who is one of the two people who are outside of the inner circle, who were reading each chapter and making suggestions for revision, and all of the sudden this third person out or fourth person out wanted me to go ahead and make changes, substantial changes, before the dissertation

was published, and I put a few things in, but it was just too late. And I thought it was unreasonable.

Despite her feeling that her particular academic environment was on a "qualitative bent," I'd argue that these factors played a substantial part in shaping her work into one that was bent on showing verifiable, testable, scientific progress.

By contrast, I saw with a few researchers I talked to that when seeking another goal—extending conversation in a particular area of study—they often chose qualitative methods instead. In one study of teacher responses to student writing, the scene that the researcher constructs for readers is one of increasing familiarity with a cast of teachers, as we learn minute details about their lives and their experiences crafting and responding to written compositions. The study is not firmly controlled by pre-existing theory, does not explain procedures for coding and analysis of transcripts, and thus depends far more upon the active effort of readers to make connections. So in contrast to the quantitative study above, which presents readers with procedures and argues that they *have been followed*, this study presents descriptive detail in order to convince readers that conclusions *make sense*. If readers develop a picture of the researcher, it is one in which she is not in her own office but instead in the office or classroom of a teacher—the site where teacher response really happens. As in Malinowski's ethnographies of Trobriand Islanders, we might picture her walking among the people she studies, discovering interesting or significant phenomena regarding teaching—but not gathering this data from books. Here is one segment:

TRANSPARENCY FOUR:

Frank and I agreed on a date when I would collect copies of drafts from him. For some reason, only four of the students who were a part of the study had submitted drafts on time. Therefore the sample is smaller than

> either of us expected it to be, and Frank's class is represented by the fewest number of papers overall. Small numbers did not hinder us from having a lengthy conversation about the course and his response practices. By the time we met on 22 November, the drafts had been revised and graded.

The passage emphasizes the informal relationship that the researcher has with the teacher, and the direct access she has to his classroom and to his students' papers.

In contrast to the epistemic subjects and verbs of the first study, the second text contains "phenomenal" subjects (again, using MacDonald's terminology) that names particular people or groups, and uses active, concrete verbs. The sensory language here gives the impression of a high amount of interpretation and an ongoing process of meaning-making, but for these very reasons does not seem to connect as easily to other texts on the same topic. MacDonald argues that phenomenal language is often featured in diffuse fields, in which disciplinary problems or issues and the methods by which they are examined are not narrowly defined.

My hunch at this preliminary stage of talking to people about research is that those wanting to effect local, situated ends for their research are using language that, according to MacDonald, emphasizes measurability and validity, and the large-scale or disciplinary issues and problems that has been done and that there is left to do—language more easily tied to a knowledge base. Those wanting to influence the direction of the field, on the other hand, may not choose the agreed-upon language of a field's practitioners, but rather the active, concrete language of the site itself and the individual people there—language seemingly harder to "tally up" in the progression toward an overarching disciplinary goal.[5]

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[5] Susan Peck MacDonald explores variations in the rhetorics of various disciplines, from psychological research on behavioral attachment to Renaissance new historicism in literary scholarship. MacDonald sees

Another hunch—and perhaps this will be no surprise to anyone—has to do with the erasure of methods sections from dissertations when they become book manuscripts. One experienced editor, for example, seemed to have had a real influence on an author's choice to revise her methods out. In this dissertation, the methods chapter was a rich and evocative account of one person's process of negotiating her way through published research and her conflicted feelings about the use of quantitative methods. The author establishes an authorial presence through the use of vignettes and anecdotes, some relating her own experiences as a student in conference with unresponsive teachers, and others discussing her aversion to numbers. We are made to see in these excerpts, as in others, processes of thinking. Her combination of highly-embedded paragraph structures with a personal, stylized tone gives the impression that readers can "watch" the researcher construct a plan of action for her study.

In preparing the book, though, method seemed something of a diversion from the gist of the argument, an authorial strategy to "cover the bases" that would no longer be necessary. The editor, she said:

> **TRANSPARENCY FIVE:**
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> . . . was kind of pointing out that I wasn't a grad student any more, and I wasn't trying to impress people. And I think probably his point about the methodology is . . . that is that I don't follow a particular methodology that is *familiar* to most of my readers. On the other hand, I have *aspects* of my methodology that are familiar to *most*. It would take far too much

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great differences in purpose, audience, context, and various linguistic markers among the disciplinary groupings she establishes. The languages writers rely upon in order to construct texts, she argues, range from the "epistemic" to the "phenomenal." In fields with well-defined, "compacted" research questions, texts resonate with "epistemic" subjects that draw a reader's attention to the concepts, categories, abstractions, and methodological tools that a researcher uses to reason about a subject. *The evidence suggests*, *MacDonald argues*, and *Social constructivism is characterized by* would all be epistemic subjects. To adopt an epistemic style in a diffuse field would imply a belief in real experiences and right answers. Such a stance—to argue in English Studies, for example, that "the evidence suggests" that one interpretation of *MacBeth* is more correct or right than others—might seem simplistic and reductive to seasoned readers.

> time and effort to explain how you do critical discourse analysis to the reader who would be buying this book.
>
> [So] in terms of how I actually put this whole [book] together, it just wasn't necessary. Since I was making no empirical or statistical claims, and since I was providing extensive transcripts for people to check my discourse analysis claims, that discourse analysts would know what I was doing, compositionists would understand the very narrative and anecdotal aspects of it, and empiricists would dismiss it anyway. (laughs)

The argument here indirectly points to production and marketing costs, space limitations, and any number of other logistical aspects of book publishing that could not have come into play when writing the dissertation. An extended justification of methods might have seemed a costly waste of resources that does not add substantially to new knowledge.

But what about the editor's comments about not being "a grad[uate] student any more"? Rather than reducing this to pejoratives, I think intertextuality is the real issue here, the process by which we wrestle with texts by citing them. We quote rather than referring obliquely to other works, we grapple with central epistemological issues, align ourselves with particular techniques for teaching and research, and show this struggle on paper as evidence of a process of coming to know. In this case, instead of being a waste of space, there were explicit connections that the author drew to an established body of research that were erased—and so the resulting book relied far more on the trust of a diverse readership that just has to accept the authors' expertise and judgment.

We're seeing just a few of the situated practices that inform research but are generally not represented in established social-scientific genres (Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge*): researchers actively negotiating institutional ties, rhetorical conventions, contradictory information, participant identities, and material conditions

such as time, money, technology, and access. I also see what researchers say as refuting the persistent view that inquiry techniques are tools that merely establish a researcher's credibility rather than actively embody a way of knowing. Empirical researchers employ methods as situated interventions in the scenes of writing and writing instruction, and in order to enact specific, localized rhetorical goals. These methodological goals—extending pedagogy, shaping curricula, guiding assessment, questioning theory—motivate the genres and conventions researchers choose to represent their work, and ultimately shape what is labeled knowledge in our field.

I want to end by pointing out that there is more than ever a need for composition studies to adopt a more explicitly rhetorical and situated perspective on research methods, one that draws our attention to the audiences, purposes, genres for which we conduct (and construct) research in the first place. Research is located within competing disciplinary histories, and its use is driven by material, social, and institutional factors about which we are only now starting to write. And because of the increasing need for researchers in composition to justify pedagogies, curriculums, and even the study of writing itself to outside audiences (such as administrators, legislators, grant-funding agencies, and diverse publics), we should keep this perspective in mind as we study the research in our field and teach its methods and histories to new researchers.

If one end of composition research is to produce more reflective writers, teachers, and researchers, we must also change the way that newcomers to the field think about research practices. Why not include in our methods courses some sense of the ways in which we construct a language for research out of our research practices—and the real rhetorical challenges we're presented with, for which there seems to be so little room in

formal articles and manuscripts? Exposing new compositionists to the contingencies of conducting research trains them to be open to research as a learning process involving both rhetoric and science, and may head off black-and-white discussions about method in the future.

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